

T E S T I M O N Y

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U.S. Interests in Europe and NATO Enlargement

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CT-131

April 1995

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U.S. INTERESTS IN EUROPE AND NATO ENLARGEMENT

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Prepared statement for a hearing before the European Subcommittee of
the Foreign Relations Committee of the United States Senate

April 27, 1995

*The views presented in this testimony are solely those of the presenter and do not necessarily represent those of RAND or any of its research sponsors.

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee: It is a pleasure for me to be here this morning to help open the first in this series of hearings on NATO enlargement. These hearings are especially timely, not only because the United States and other NATO members are approaching a decision point on the next step in the expansion process, but also because a broader discussion and debate on the larger issues surrounding the question of NATO expansion is very much overdue. The purpose of our discussion today, as I understand it, is to assess how well or how poorly expanding NATO membership into East Central Europe (ECE) serves American interests in Europe and European security. I regret that a national discussion and debate such as the one you are now initiating did not precede the Administration's decision at the end of last year to accelerate the expansion process.

Let me begin by stating an assumption that underlies my position on all these matters. It is that the United States has an enduring interest -- political, military, economic, and cultural -- in Europe and that maintaining strong transatlantic bonds with our European allies is the best way to assure European security, keep the United States engaged in Europe, and provide a forum for the exercise of U.S. leadership in transatlantic affairs. Moreover, I also see NATO as the premier institution for managing these transatlantic relations even in the post-Cold War environment. I want to repeat this rather straightforward internationalist litany at the outset because some of those who have spoken out against NATO enlargement have done so on the grounds that Europe is becoming increasingly less important to the United States, that Europeans can and should be left to take responsibility for their own security interests, and that the U.S. has more important, higher priority interests to look after in the post-Cold War world.

My own skepticism about NATO expansion stems not from a belief that we no longer have a strong national interest in promoting European security or in strengthening transatlantic ties, but from serious questions about the appropriateness of NATO expansion for advancing those interests and deep concerns that expansion may have undesirable unintended consequences that could outweigh the benefits we seek.

Let me list briefly the U.S. interests that are involved in consideration of NATO enlargement. First, there is our interest in strengthening our ties to Europe that help to promote stability there and to keep the U.S. engaged, and specifically our interest in strengthening the NATO alliance, which seems at loose ends in the post-Cold War era now that the canonical threat which it was created to deter has faded from the scene. Does expanding NATO's membership to the East speak to the problems and disarray that now beset NATO?

Second, there is our interest in helping to consolidate the independence, democratic development and stability of the states that formerly comprised NATO's alliance adversary. Of these states, those of ECE, the Visegrad Four -- Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia, are generally considered the most likely candidates for early entry into NATO. How does NATO membership for these states contribute to advancing our interest in their stability and democratic development? Is NATO membership the best alternative for this purpose?

Third, there is our interest in enhancing European security overall, not only in states that would be incorporated into the Western Alliance, but also in those left beyond NATO's borders that will not be candidates for membership in the foreseeable future, particularly the former Soviet republics in Europe, and especially Ukraine. How might NATO expansion to selected ECE states affect Europe's overall security?

And fourth, there is our interest in enhancing the probability of a healthy outcome to the process of revolutionary transformation which Russia is now undergoing, or, at least, in not inadvertently harming its chances. Weakened and crisis-ridden as it is today, Russia is still Europe's most heavily armed power, with tens of thousands of nuclear weapons in its arsenal. A Russia that emerged from its transition with a stake in stabilizing the European order could make management of Europe's future security problems much easier; a revisionist Russia that felt itself shut out would make European security much harder to manage and far more danger-prone.

In my judgment, the debate has not yet fully come to grips with the fact that NATO enlargement is bound to have divergent effects on these multiple American interests. There is no artful formula that can

somehow make it come out as a strong "plus" for all affected interests. NATO enlargement serves some of our interests in Europe; it is irrelevant or only marginally relevant to others; and to still others, it is antithetical. There are some hard choices to be made. The contribution that these hearings can make is to help the Senate, which will be called on to ratify any NATO expansion that takes place, and the American people, to understand more clearly the nature of the choices that must be made in confronting this question and their likely consequences, intended and otherwise.

On reviving NATO. It is my strong impression that the proposal to expand NATO owes much of its appeal to the paucity of other ideas in circulation about ways to revive the fortunes of the flagging Western Alliance and to overcome the torpor that has afflicted it. In the presence of this conceptual vacuum, virtually the entire burden of reviving NATO has been laid on enlargement. The burden is much heavier than enlargement can bear. In fact, the relevance of expanding membership in the Alliance to solving the critical problems that beset it is not at all obvious. We cannot solve NATO's "out-of-area" problem by expanding membership into every potential "other area." Besides, the most urgent and likely "out-of-area" venues lie to the south rather than to the east of NATO Europe. Expanding membership into East Central Europe cannot make it easier for the alliance to make "out-of-area" decisions. Would NATO do better in Bosnia with four additional member governments in its already clogged decision chain? NATO expansion is largely irrelevant to the list of things that ail NATO and an expanded membership would probably make "governance" matters worse. And while a vital NATO is essential for continued U.S. engagement in Europe, it is a heroic stretch to place an equal sign, as some expansion enthusiasts have done, between the U.S. staying in Europe and NATO expanding its membership. A more telling consideration is the strong preference of our strongest European ally, Germany, to be surrounded by allied countries rather than to remain on the eastern fringe of the Western alliance.

The new low ebb in transatlantic relations generally and in NATO in particular requires a profound dialogue on the most basic questions of

the Western alliance's common purpose in the absence of an overarching military threat. We have not engaged in that kind of dialogue with our allies. What we have had instead is an endless round of finger-pointing recriminations over Bosnia. To expand NATO's membership absent a new understanding of what the Western Alliance is all about displays the same kind of logic that leads a couple in a deeply troubled marriage to forego marital therapy and have a new baby instead.

On promoting stability in East Central Europe. This is the biggest and most important benefit to be garnered by NATO expansion. Admission to the Western Alliance would strengthen the confidence of our friends in East Central Europe and reassure them about their long-term security. But given that the security threat to ECE from Russia is at this stage quite remote, that it will not arise at all if Russia does not go very "sour," and would, even in that case, take years to materialize, there are other ways, with more immediate material benefits than NATO expansion, for promoting the rapid integration of ECE into democratic Europe. NATO, which is above all a military alliance, can contribute only indirectly to promoting democracy and free markets in East Central Europe. It is important to recall that the first and main response to the challenges of resisting anti-democratic political forces and promoting the economic recovery of post-World War II Europe was the Marshall Plan, not NATO, which was formed only two years later.

A much more appropriate approach to enhancing the region's stability would be to accelerate the integration of East Central European states into Western Europe's economic and political institutions, notably by membership in the European Union. Movement toward NATO membership might proceed in tandem as a more natural evolutionary accompaniment. If the leading members of the European Union, who are also our principal NATO allies, are unwilling to make the economic sacrifices that may be required to accelerate EU membership for East Central European states within the time frame now being suggested for NATO expansion, then the seriousness of our allies about the urgency of stabilizing ECE has to be questioned. It is a strategically bankrupt policy to advocate NATO expansion (with its attendant political-military

costs vis-a-vis states further east) as a "cheap" substitute for a more relevant and much less politically costly way of accomplishing similar ends. Still, having said all of this, the psychological reassurance that NATO membership would provide to East Central European states would make a significant contribution to their stability and is, in my view, the strongest argument for NATO expansion.

On European security. If one accepts the official argument that NATO expansion is not directed at containing a "Russian threat," then the contribution that expanded membership to ECE states would make to preventing or coping with lesser threats to those countries, like ethno-communal conflict, hardly compensates for the potential downside effects of selective expansion for countries further east (The threat of ethno-communal conflict is, in any case, chiefly a problem for Southeastern Europe, and is hardly an issue in Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic). If one accepts that there is a potential Russian threat to the East Central Europe states, the question is: does the added security insurance offered to ECE against what is at this stage a remote threat, outweigh the more immediate potential decrement to security for Russia's neighbors who are left out?

In my judgment, NATO's expansion to the east is certain to stimulate efforts by Russia to shore up its western flank, if only to try to ensure that NATO expansion stops at the Polish-Ukrainian border. NATO expansion could profoundly influence the way Russia resolves its difficult dilemmas in the "near abroad." The general warming of Russia's elites to "integration" includes a very wide range of contradictory and ambivalent views about how far down that road Russia should be prepared to go, how the tradeoffs between strategic benefits and economic burdens should be made, and how Russia's policy in the "near abroad" could affect its interests in the world beyond. Except for extremists on the fringes of the Russian political spectrum, for whom a restored Soviet Union or a reborn Russian Empire is intrinsically the supreme value, the debate is still very much alive and the question is open. NATO expansion would almost certainly increase the weight of security benefits in Russian calculations of tradeoffs with economic costs and impart to the

CIS-integration process a more pronounced turn toward creation of a broad Russian-led military alliance system. Pressures on Ukraine to move beyond economic integration toward security ties with Russia would surely follow, with consequences that could threaten Ukraine's independence, or security, or both. Would there be a net benefit to European security from trying to fill one "security vacuum" at the expense of deepening insecurity in an adjacent one?

On implications for Russia's future course. This is or should really be at the heart of the debate, but the Clinton Administration's juggling of the Russian factor in its handling of the NATO expansion issue has obscured the fundamental problem. Initially, in proposing the Partnership for Peace program, the Administration sought to provide a vehicle for developing military relations between NATO and East Central European states (among others) while deferring to Russian sensitivities by consigning NATO membership expansion to an indefinite future "as part of an evolutionary process, taking into account political and security developments in the whole of Europe." This was a formula that seemed to condition NATO expansion on the emergence of potential new security threats. Last December, for reasons that U.S. officials have not yet made clear, the Administration decided to accelerate the process, declaring the question of whether to expand settled, but denying that expansion had anything to do with a "Russian threat." Great effort was expended on trying to persuade Russians that NATO expansion into the space of the former Warsaw Pact alliance not only did not adversely affect Russia's interests, but was indeed a boon. Still, at the same time, the Administration began to explore a "parallel track" that would seek to compensate Russia for acquiescing gracefully in NATO expansion by formalizing, in one way or another, a NATO-Russia relationship that would recognize Russia's special status as a unique European power.

However, getting a particular Russian government at a particular time to swallow NATO expansion in a summit communique is only one side of the Russian problem, the more immediate, tactical side. Much more important are the strategic consequences that NATO expansion is likely

to have for Russia's long-term search for a new post-Soviet post-Communist identity and for a place in the post-Cold War world.

No matter how artfully NATO manages to disguise it, NATO expansion will signify to most Russians, including those most committed to Western values and institutions, the drawing of a new line in Europe that establishes which states the West is geared up to include and which not. It will further discredit in Russian eyes the West's talk about integrating Russia fully into the community of industrial democracies and lend weight to the argument that Russia cannot afford to pursue a modernization strategy that depends critically on its integration into the West. The case, now largely restricted to nationalist-extremists and unreconstructed communists, that the West is not merely indifferent to Russian interests, but hostile to them, will be buttressed by the argument that NATO, having gotten Soviet troops back behind the new Russian borders, is now regrouping to consolidate further to the east the favorable geopolitical situation created for it by the collapse of the Soviet Union. Larger sections of the Russian elite will conclude that Russia, if it is not to settle for isolation on the fringe of Europe, must therefore find a different, uniquely Russian place for itself in the world, looking beyond the American "partner" and outside of NATO Europe for allies and for an arena in which to assert its aspirations to be a great and respected power in the world.

The feeding of these perceptions, it seems to me, is the real price that the West must risk paying for proceeding with selective NATO expansion. Whether, on balance, the risk is worth taking or not depends heavily on the bets one is willing to make about Russia's potential for developing into a "normal" great power.

There are two polar views around which the debate about Russia's potential revolves. The more geopolitically-oriented view holds that Russia, on virtually existential grounds, is fated to remain an "outside power," not capable of being assimilated by the West, driven by its history, geography, and traditions to be an expansionist force in world politics, and extremely unlikely to overcome its deeply ingrained authoritarianism, if only because its intrinsic imperialism is fundamentally incompatible with its democratization. On this view, NATO

expansion is an easy call: It is both vital for ECE and European security and there is little to be lost with respect to its impact on Russian evolution; indeed, on this view, expanding soon while Russia is weak is much wiser than waiting until she is stronger. A softer, less dogmatic version of this position does not entirely preclude an eventual democratic landing for Russia, but, given what are held to be very long odds, believes that a policy of insuring against a likely and possibly dangerous "sour" outcome in Russia deserves a higher priority than betting on a welcome, but unlikely, happy ending.

At the other end of the spectrum is a view that combines a neo-Wilsonian liberal internationalist belief in the cardinal importance of promoting Russia's democratic development and integration into the Western-led international community, and a hard-nosed "Russocentric" view that basic U.S. national security interests require a priority on maintaining stable conditions for U.S.-Russian cooperation in managing nuclear weapons command and control, reduction, and dismantling. On this view, so long as Russia remains at least a reasonable bet for a "healthy" evolution, the centrality of Russia for the post-Cold War global political-military system and for U.S. interests in nuclear stability argues against doing harm to prospects for a favorable outcome in Russia in exchange even for some other real but comparatively second-order security benefits.

Careful analysis and thoughtful ordering of America's priority interests may lead some to conclude that the benefits adduced for expanding NATO into East Central Europe outweigh the costs and that the best course of action is to bite the bullet, do the best we can to minimize the negative consequences we foresee, but move forward expeditiously, reducing the risk that temporizing and procrastination might cause the entire effort to unravel. Alternatively, we may conclude that the costs substantially outweigh the benefits and therefore decide to place formal expansion on the back burner, or otherwise to stretch out the process, as originally implied by the Partnership for Peace program, recognizing that the political costs of openly reversing the enlargement process have now become too great for that to be an acceptable option. To decide between these two

alternatives means to weigh very carefully the benefits claimed for NATO expansion and the potential costs. I trust that the hearings which have been launched today will help the Congress and responsible Administration officials to choose wisely.

